DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 248 CS 505 534

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TITLE Music Video as Electronic Opera and Electronic Lyric.
PUB DATE Feb 87
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Central States Speech Association and the Southern Speech Communication Association (St. Louis, MO, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; Content Analysis; Mass Media Effects; *Popular Culture; *Programing (Broadcast); Songs; *Television Viewing; Visual Stimuli
IDENTIFIERS Audience Response; *Music Videos

ABSTRACT

A deconstruction of music videos that makes visible their aesthetic rules or grammar is necessary before an overall theoretical understanding is possible. Content-analytic studies usually divide music videos into two groups: "performance" and "concept" videos. Concept videos, in turn, can be subdivided into two different kinds: narrative dramatic videos and lyrical videos. Narrative videos tell a story, albeit with emotional overlay and expressive flair, while lyrical videos may be likened to imagist poetry in contrast to dramatic monologues. A narrative unfolds in three phases, or acts--in Act I, a problematic situation is set up; in Act II, protagonists and antagonists confront each other; and in Act III, the problem is resolved and the consequences of its resolution are presented. Contemporary media writers and teachers claim that virtually every television and film story uses the dramatic narrative form. Michael Jackson's songs "Billie Jean" and "Beat It" are both examples of dramatic narratives set to music. In contrast, lyrical music videos present a series of images that express feeling or create mood, offering no narrative structure to psychic streams-of-consciousness. For example, Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart" video offers a series of dream-like vignettes that, taken together, recall symbolist poetry or surrealist painting. The influence of lyrical music videos, which provide intensely personal experiences, on conventional television programming is widely acknowledged. "Miami Vice" and certain television commercials are good examples of this influence. Lyricism will almost certainly be used more frequently and with greater sophistication in the future. (NKA)

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MUSIC VIDEO AS ELECTRONIC OPERA AND ELECTRONIC LYRIC

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February 1987

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes three species of the music video genre: the presentational, the dramatic, and the lyric. Lyric music videos have given rise to a new, second generation of programming by adding expressive elements to the dramatic narrative formula of television.

There is general agreement that music video is something new in mass-mediated culture. From an aesthetic/critical point of view, music videos are striking in the "density" of their "juxtapositional montage".[1] Their content often includes disturbing images of sex, violence[2] and death.[3] The impact and effects of music videos have been likened to the implications of Nietzscheian nihilism: "criticism, even ridicule, of societal values. . . . [and] calls for outright anarchy."[4]

There are a few studies of aesthetic aspects of music video,[5] some content-analytic studies,[6] and a larger number of treatments in the trade and popular press which focus on music videos as commercial vehicles.[7] However, we are certainly very far from a coherent understanding of the aesthetics of music videos which has the stature of, say, the auteur school of film criticism. The discussions in scholarly studies, and the popular press items on music video, usually either tacitly assume that this new genre can be assimilated to the standing ideas about television aesthetics and effects or they simply ignore the theoretical dimensions and implications of the new form.

Before an overall theoretical understanding of music video is possible, preliminary "systematic description and interpretation"[8] must be done. This provides a basis for building a critical theory. The critical and content-analytic studies cited above are valuable for their

contributions to this effort of naturalistic observation. Both the form and the content of the new televisual genre must be unpacked. Essentially, this amounts to a deconstruction of music videos that will make visible their aesthetic rules, or grammar. This project should precede questions about uses or effects. We need "sufficient descriptive and interpretive work"[9] to support theoretical explanation; in short, we need to "begin at the beginning"[10] with music video. This essay is an attempt to do that.

The content-analytic studies tend to divide music videos into two groups: "performance" videos and "concept"[11] videos. This essay will not have much to say about the first category. Televisual and filmic texts which document rock music performances (so-called "rockumentaries") are familiar and rather straightforward. The performances may be embellished with all sorts of intricate musical and presentational techniques, but the capture of the performance on videotape or film is usually unremarkable, at least to audiences who have learned well to accept and appreciate traditional televisual techniques such as mixes, zooms, slo-mo, etc. But the concept videos need to be looked at more closely, because here new and exciting experiences are being offered to viewer/listeners. Also, it is now generally accepted that the new elements of concept videos are quickly seeping into and transforming traditional television programming[12] and films. (<u>Flashdance</u> and its ilk

are examples.)

The categorization of performance versus concept videos might just as well be a distinction between performance and "other," from this essay's point of view. The concept category seems clearly to include two very different sorts of music videos. One is like traditional television and film fare in that it is essentially narrative drama; it tells a story, albeit often with much emotional overlay and expressive flair. But then, conventional operas are narrative dramas which add expressive elements to the narrative dramas of legitimate theater. This sort of media text--the narrative drama--is familiar.

But there is another sort of concept music video that doesn't tell--or hardly tells-- a story at all. Instead, it uses audiovisual symbols without a storyline, or with a minimal, barely discernable storyline, to express feelings or present abstract concepts. These videos resemble lyric poems. Lyrical music videos may be likened to imagist poetry, sonnets or odes, in contrast to dramatic monologues. They are like expressive songs rather than ballads or story-songs.

Since virtually all conventional television programming is narrative drama, the distinction between dramatic and lyric music videos is important. It is the lyric videos that truly represent something new in the culture of television. While Michael Jackson's videos ("Beat It, "Billie

Jean," "Thriller;" Epic) are embellished dramatic narratives, Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart" (Columbia) and Nik Kershaw's "Wouldn't It Be Good?" (MCA) do not have a storyline in any conventional sense; they are expressive, audiovisual lyrics. With these examples, and an intuitive sense of the differences between dramatic and lyric texts, in mind, this essay will look more closely at dramatic versus lyric videos, and try to show that lyric videos are adding interesting new elements to traditional electronic media texts.

Dramatic Narrative Structure

The stories that make up the literature of Western culture have been cast in the form of dramatic narration since the time of classical Greece and before. (The Bible is largely a compendium of dramatic narratives.) A dramatic narrative unfolds in three phases, or acts. In the first act, a problematic situation is set up. The second act is a dramatic *agon* in which protagonists and antagonists confront each other. In the third act, the problem is resolved and the consequences of its resolution are presented. The first act ends with a "plot point"[13] at which all the elements of the problem are "in place." The second act ends with another plot point, the climactic moment of the story, which is sometimes called

the "peripeteia" (turn-around).

The epic of the Trojan War exemplifies dramatic narration. The problem begins, of course, with the abduction of Helen. The first plot point occurs when the Greek warships set out for Troy. The second plot point is the scene in which the Trojans take the wooden horse into the city. In the third act, the Greeks return to their homeland to live happily ever after. The adventures of Odysseus' prolonged journey back can be seen as a three-act drama set within the third act of the Trojan War story.

Contemporary would-be media writers are admonished to fashion their stories as dramatic narratives,[14] and "expert" media writers and teachers of media writing claim that virtually every television and film story has the dramatic narrative form.[15] There are of course, exceptions-- Last Year at Marienbad is a famous one--but they seem to be exceptions that prove the rule. Television soap operas manipulate the dramatic narrative form so that third-act resolutions are delayed and always contain the seeds of the problem of the next first act. But film and television texts generally present complete dramatic narratives in their 120, or 60 or 30 minutes of program time.

Dramatic Narration in Music Videos

Many concept music videos are dramatic narratives, often embellished with expressive, lyrical effects but essentially stories nonetheless. Such videos might be viewed as electronic mini-operas. Michael Jackson's classics, "Billie Jean," "Beat It" and "Thriller," are widely-known examples of this type. In "Billie Jean," the first act's set-up includes an introduction to a drab cityscape; the entrance of Jackson as an other-worldly hero whose character is emblematized by imagery of light which literally marks his every step; a sinister, trenchcoated photographer-villain, who, in trying to capture Jackson's image, seems to be attempting to steal his soul; and hints of a scandal (the newspaper headline about Billie Jean). The first act's plot point occurs when Jackson magically escapes the photographer's efforts to capture his spirit. In the second act, the protagonist mulls over his situation and his relationship to Billie Jean in song and dance. Here the action recalls Neil Simon's idea that, while every dramatic narrative centers on a conflict, it need not be a conflict between *persons*. Rather, Simon points out that the conflict can be between a protagonist and "the circumstances of life."[16] The second plot point is the moment when Jackson climbs into bed with the girl, and then mysteriously disappears, again surrounded by an aura of light. In the

third act's resolution, the police arrive (in a manner quite reminiscent of "the cavalry coming over the hill"), and take possession of the shadowy photographer. Our hero, invisible except for his signature of light, goes off "into the sunset."

While much of the plot of Billie Jean is ambiguous--we hardly know what to make of the action at the two plot points--it *is* clear that the story has the shape of a dramatic narrative, albeit a mysterious one. The dramatic narrative of "Beat It" is quite obvious. A first act culminates in the face-off of the two gangs. The second act begins with what seems to be a "rumble," but, at the second plot point, Jackson transforms the fight into what, in the third act, becomes an ensemble dance of harmony.

"Billie Jean" and "Beat It" are clearly dramatic narratives set to music (even though the music actually preceded the staging, of course), and many other music videos fit this pattern. (David Bowie's "China Girl" [EMI America] for instance, is another example of the type.) But other music videos are lyric and expressive in essence rather than dramatic. These videos seem to be harbingers of something truly new in in television--something other than dramatic storytelling.

Music Video as Electronic Lyric

Like lyric poems, some music videos present a series of images that express feeling or create mood. A striking example is Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart." The title suggests either falling in love or experiencing the end of a love affair, but the video tells no such story. Instead, it presents a series of dream-like vignettes which, taken together, recall symbolist or imagist poetry, or surrealist painting. The overall meaning of these images is not at all clear, but their effect is powerful. "Eclipse" is an example of a type of video which features "psycho-symbolic imagery"[17] without a discernable storyline. The Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams" (RCA) is another of this sort.

Such videos give an interior view, so to speak, of the intrapersonal chatter of thoughts, images and feelings which we each experience. There is often--perhaps usually--no narrative structure to our psychic streams-of-consciousness. They, and the music videos which mimic them, are quite similar to the juxtaposition of images without temporal/causal order which occurs in a film such as Last Year at Marienbad. Among the better-known videos which depart from the structure of traditional dramatic narration are: Herbie Hancock's "Rock It," (Columbia) Laura

Brannigan's "Self Control" (Atlantic) and David Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes" (RCA).

In an uncanny way, the content of some lyrical music videos seems to represent the suggestive, symbolizing process itself. These videos, in other words, *present* what they *represent*. "Wouldn't it be Good?," "Baby Come Back" (Billy Rankin, A&M) and "Mind My Have Still I" (What Is This, MCA) are of this type. In them, the images, memories, etc. which are the material of lyrical expression appear framed by the heads and bodies of the artists. In this way, these videos plainly announce that they are to be understood, to be seen and heard, as lyrical texts of expression rather than as dramatic stories. Like traditional lyric poetry, they make private emotions public.

Turner has suggested that such videos draw on the material of an "iconic data base,"[18] a cultural bank of televisual and filmic material, from which they compile a series of expressive, lyrical images meant to create emotion or mood by suggestion, rather than to dramatize it by storytelling. This technique is very much like that of the early imagist poetry of Ezra Pound or the imagistic Japanese form of haiku. Such lyric/expressive videos are not only themselves a new element in our culture's audiovisual library; they have also prompted the use of lyrical elements in mainstream television and film texts.

Music Video Subgenres and Conventional Television

Since the end of the 1950s, when television saturation was achieved in America, TV has been the central voice of our culture. It has played a "bardic"[19] role as witness to our public events and as leisure-time storyteller. It has been the medium by which our society shares experiences, both historical and fictive. But in the last decade, the mass audiences of traditional network television have begun to fragment into smaller groups with diverse interests which select their information and entertainment from an ever-increasing number of specialized media channels. Music video programs and channels are one kind of specialized narrowcast service, one of particular interest and concern because of its content and age/peer-group appeal.

This essay suggests that the first step in understanding music video, even if the motivation to understand is driven by concern with this new form's effects, is to map out its poetics and describe its subgenres in general terms. There seem to be three species: the presentational, the dramatic and the lyrical. The presentational subgenre of music video includes clips that record, or document, performances. Often these documentaries include technical tricks (e.g., stop-action, changes of camera angles and distances) that give views which would be unavailable

to a live audience. But then, most documentaries at least include edited transitions, if not more elaborate technical manipulations, which make them something other than *video verite'*.

A second subgenre is that of music videos which are instances of dramatic narration. These clips are little story pieces which have a structure similar to that of conventional, mainstream television programming. The difference is that they are dense with special technical effects that make them not bare dramatic narratives, but elaborate mini-operas, dramas heavy with symbolic suggestions and emotional overlays.

Lyrical music videos which do not present a coherent dramatic narrative are a third subgenre. This species is perhaps the most interesting, for it seems to be something new in television programming. It presents private emotions, as traditional lyric poetry does, and so it personalizes television. Television, when it shows lyrical music videos, does not speak with a bardic voice; rather it presents invitations to intimate experiences. This lyricism is, in a way, counterpart to the structural fragmentation of television's trend toward narrowcasting. It is, perhaps, not merely coincidental that, in the last decade, specialized cable services have come of age, VCRs have been welcomed in American homes, and music videos which provide intensely personal, lyrical

experiences have appeared.

By now, the influence of lyrical music videos in in conventional television programming is widely acknowledged. Miami Vice is the preeminent example; "The 'Vice' Look"[20] might just as well be called the "Vice Sound." Other action/adventure series, such as Knight Rider and Magnum, P. I., also now include lyrical episodes, though these elements are not usually so well integrated into their dramatic stories as are the lyrical aspects of Miami Vice. But that is surely because lyricism is a new addition to mainstream TV fare; it will almost certainly be used more, and with more sophistication, in the future.

Elements of lyrical music video have invaded television commercials even more swiftly and pervasively than they have found a place in TV's programs. By now, all viewers are familiar with spots that present mood (and usually have accompanying music) to generate product appeal, rather than offer product information. Beer commercials excel at this, but other examples abound: Diet Pepsi spots, Levi's jeans ads, etc.

Perhaps the most interesting critical observation to be made about music video, as this essay hints at its beginning, is that the lyrical element which has emerged in music video clips is something new and different from the dramatic narration which has filled TV screens in the past. Lyricism seems to be the mark of a new generation of television

texts, a generation which got its start in lyrical music video. Exploration of this new kind of programming ought to begin with an effort at thorough "description and interpretation."[21] In that spirit, this essay has attempted to begin to sort out and catalogue the species of the music video genre.

Footnotes

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[9] Hawes 68.

[10] Hawes 68.

[11] Davis 11.

[12] Michael Pollan, "The 'Vice' Look," *Channels* 5.2 (1985) 24-28.

[13] Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982) 8-9.

[14] Stewart Bronfeld, *Writing for Film and Television* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

[15] Field 9.

[16] "Screenwriter: Neil Simon," *Words Into Images: Portraits of American Screenwriters*, dir. Terry Sanders, prod. Frieda Lee Mock, American Film Foundation, PBS, KOCE, Orange Co., CA, 1981.

[17] Turner, *Money for Nothing*, 5.

[18] Turner, *Iconic Data Base*, 381.

[19] John Fiske, and John Hartly, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1976) 85.

[20] Pollan 25.

[21] Hawes 64.